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The Feature Film Magazine

Moviegoer



***Christopher Reeve:
MAN AND SUPERMAN***

Plus: Francis Coppola's Favorite New Actress

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BEHIND THE SCENES



The urRu, a tribe of gentle philosophers, are among the many new species that people *The Dark Crystal*.

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Location Shooting In a Fantasy World

Jim Henson has gone beyond Muppets and created the world of The Dark Crystal, a land inhabited totally by Gelflings, Skeksis, and other nonhuman creatures.

Jim Henson, creator of the fuzzy puppets that starred in the two Muppet movies, has completed a six-year odyssey culminating in the creation of an alien world in his new film, *The Dark Crystal*. He has peopled that world with flawlessly lifelike but nonhuman creatures (as if Yoda and E.T. got together with a couple of dozen of their friends) who are on an Arthurian epic quest.

Concerned that intense realism is taking over films, Henson set out to create "another degree of realism." But he didn't want to enter the high-tech fantasy world pioneered by George Lucas in *Star Wars*. Henson wanted "more of an organic, humanistic sort of thing."

The result is a \$20 million classic tale of good and evil, an adventure story about a timeless world with three suns, a once-enlightened kingdom that came under evil influences long ago. The action centers on the search for a mysterious crystal shard that could affect the future of that world forever. Henson's intent was to create a plausible story set in a fantasy land with characters whose emotions were so genuine and whose movements were so smooth that they resembled people around us.

The heroes of this quest are Jen and Kira, a young male and female, respectively, of a breed called Gelflings. Although they are advanced puppet figures of sorts, they are humanlike in form, gesture, and spirit. And as audiences hear them speak and watch them move, they are likely to regard them as flesh-and-blood figures, not mechanical creatures made of foam latex and other materials.

Starting with only the barest outline of the dark-crystal world in his mind, Henson turned to British author-illustrator Brian Froud (*The Land of Froud, Faeries*)



for help. "Jim came to me with some vague ideas and a lot of enthusiasm," Froud recalls. "We wanted to create a story very much like the old myths, and Jim allowed me the freedom to visualize what it looked like." Believing that fantasy must have some basis in reality, Froud based the landscape of his imaginary, nameless world on the rugged Dartmoor region of Devon in western England, where he lives.

As the creative process moved ahead, the *Dark Crystal* technical team expanded. Frank Oz, Henson's longtime collaborator (he's Miss Piggy to Henson's Kermit, Bert to his Ernie), joined as co-director and performer. Gary Kurtz, producer of the first two *Star Wars* epics, came aboard as producer. Veteran production designer Harry Lange supervised the construction of the sets, which were based on Froud's concepts and drawings.

In April 1981 the group began filming, and each character, each movement, represented a new problem. "We had to create the characters in such a way that they could dramatically act and emotionally interact with each other," says producer Kurtz. "The only way we could do that was to take advantage of various new technologies—radio-control mech-

anisms, mechanical linkage, hydraulic engineering."

Henson adds, "I'll use any technique that works." For example, he employed several different methods to create hand movements for the characters. "Each one took a totally different sort of solution," says Henson. The performers' fingers were in direct contact with the long clawlike hands of the Skeksis (as in a basic hand puppet), while the Gelflings' hands and fingers were operated by rods, grips, and levers on a pulley system.

To create complex facial expressions, Henson embedded radio controls beneath the creatures' foam-latex skin so that the corners of their mouths could be tugged or their eyebrows raised on cue.

Three or four people manipulate each "creature," but "when you see nine characters on the screen," says Oz, "you're really talking about upward of 45 people working on them." The creatures are seen in action on a platform with the puppeteers operating them from below. Oz played several characters (as did Henson). When more than one of his characters was involved in the same scene, Oz assumed the principal role and played other roles in closeups. Because both Henson and Oz love to perform, they shared directing chores on the film.

Henson played the Gelfling Jen. It was, he says, his toughest assignment: "Everything Jen did had to be realistic because he's such a realistic character. The tiniest movements—simple walking, glancing around—had to be believable."

"I believe we have created a reality," adds Oz. "When you see the movie, you'll really believe those creatures live in that world. Whether it'll be the success that *E.T.* or *Star Wars* was is a crapshoot. We just did our best."★

—Michael Bandler